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The Stranger and the Critics

Author(s): Louis Hudon

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The Stranger and the Critics

Camus' *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*) no longer exists, and can never again exist in the magnificently naked purity of the text which captured and has held the attention of the now almost middle-aged "youth" of the early post World War II period. Ironically, the principal corrupting agent was Camus himself. Those things which are usually released years after death, private journals, manuscripts which the author did not choose to publish, he himself made available. The result has been that it is now often impossible in Camus criticism to differentiate between published text, unpublished text, Camus' verbal statement, the critic's interpretation of any of the preceding, and the critic's own ideas. To make matters worse, labels such as "the literature of despair" or "the underground man" have been applied and they have stuck. Almost everyone has approached Camus and *L'Étranger* bound by his own tradition, prejudices, or critical apparatus. For the Christian, Camus does not understand Christianity because he rejects the doctrine of original sin. For one who must be presumed to be an admirer of the copious verbalism of the nineteenth century, *L'Étranger* is "a slim (although engaging) *récit* that might easily be crushed under the weight of the *explication*." Many put their nickel in the philosophical slot, and existentialism comes out of everywhere, others in the new critical slot, and it rains symbols. Yet we knew, really knew, what Camus was saying fifteen years ago, without benefit of commentary. Camus' book becomes simple and clear once it is divested of critical and philosophical misinterpretation.

The most clearly false, and at the same time the most widely accepted, of the barriers between the reader and the text of *L'Étranger* is the idea that Camus is an existentialist and his book an existentialist document. This misconception can be swept away even in the face of that part of the existentialist credo which is a sort of universal *reductio ad* existentialism. Not all anguish is existential, and certainly very few stomach disorders need be classified as such; yet Meursault's feeling of nausea due to lack of cigarettes has been called "both existential, and lyric." Existentialist heroes tend to be adolescent and garrulous by nature. They exist, by definition and doctrine, only with reference to others. Meursault, however, has already attained maturity before the beginning of the book, without crisis, effortlessly, as one breathes, and his taciturnity, which is of the essence of his character, results from the instinctive knowledge that any true communication with others is impossible. Existentialism, at least contemporary exis-

tentialism, offers a weird species of intellectual comfort in its verbalisms and its doctrine of satisfying engagement. Camus refused all systems, all facile solutions. Sartre's Hugo Barine dies giving meaning, however private, to his absurd existence; Meursault dies in the only peace to be possibly achieved, in the deep and total acceptance of the feeling, not the doctrine, of the absurd.

It must not be inferred, however, that *L'Étranger* is a treatise on the perception of the absurd, a book about a man who is transformed by an experience, one whom a pistol shot "jolts out of his purely negative state." In the first part of the narrative, Meursault is already in complete and calm possession of that negative truth which Camus mentions in his preface to the American school edition of *L'Étranger*. When asked by his employer early in the narrative whether he would be interested in working in a Paris office which the company would establish, he answered "yes, but that in the final analysis I didn't care one way or the other. He asked me then if I was interested in changing my life. I answered that you never changed your life, that in any case all were of equal value and that mine here was not at all unpleasant . . . When I was a student, I had many ambitions of this nature. But when I had to abandon my studies, I very quickly understood that all that was of no real importance." Most revealing is a sentence which occurs in the explosive and truly lyric last pages of the book and which is never quoted by those who would believe in the existential transformation of Camus' character. The use of the pluperfect tense is most significant: "I had been right, I was still right, I was always right." His adventure has changed none of his ideas. The point here is not the revelation of the absurd, but simple certainty of the feeling of the absurd, intensified by a situation created by a master craftsman. *L'Étranger* is not primarily a philosophical work, though this be indeed heresy in an age where to philosophize is no longer to learn how to die, as Montaigne said, but to learn how to read. It has been maintained that "the novel is incomprehensible except in the context of all his [Camus'] works," and a whole book has been written on Camus' literary works "to find support and illustration for his philosophical position." This might be legitimate where Sartre is concerned, but Camus is primarily a creative artist whose philosophical concepts, even, have their roots in emotion.

To read, however, is also find myth and symbol. For contemporary tastes no book is worth while unless it has something to do with "time, thematic devices, structure, myth, patterns and symbols." All these have been found in *L'Étranger*. "The central ironic device in *L'Étranger*," it seems, "is its reconstruction of the Sisyphus myth. The irony arises out of the transformation of the hero-antagonist of the gods into an office clerk who spends his days working on bills of lading and the rest of his time in a variety of dull and sordid adven-

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tures.” This would have to be irony for the author alone, for there is unfortunately nothing in the text to initiate the reader. There are certainly symbols in *L’Etranger*, as there are symbols anywhere in human existence, but the symbol specialist must proceed with caution. The sun, the sea, and swimming have symbolic values for Camus, but it so happens that Algiers is a very sunny place situated on the sea, and Camus liked to swim, like Hemingway, like everybody else, just like everybody else, just like Meursault. The significant symbols in *L’Etranger* are of a broader nature, and concern basic themes in Camus’ work. The parallel between Meursault as a Christ figure, clearly indicated by the words “In order that all be consummated” on the last page of *L’Etranger*, and the Christ of the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, for example, seems to have attracted no attention. The message is the same, that any individual who threatens, by his mere existence, established power or accepted ideology must be quietly eliminated by any society. The critics, too, are in their way Grand Inquisitors. Their discussions of the death of the Arab, of Meursault’s liaison with Marie, and of the ethics of *L’Etranger* are most revealing.

Those who have found it necessary to summarize the first part of *L’Etranger* seem to have taken a kind of malignant satisfaction in doing so from the point of view of the investigating magistrate or the prosecuting attorney. Meursault is presented as “an insignificant bureaucrat” who commits a “crime” which is “psychologically inexplicable,” and the only excuse to be found for this crime is that it must be a Gidean “gratuitous act.” All this in spite of the fact that the entire first part of *L’Etranger* exists to tell, from the inside of an individual personality, the simple details of an act which people are going to misinterpret because they will see it from the outside; and in people’s lives, it is Meursault who says it, “You can never know.” The muscular contraction which causes the revolver to fire is an involuntary act, most carefully presented as such, an accident. At worst, it is involuntary manslaughter, not murder. The four other shots, those which condemn him, are simply an act of immense exasperation, exercised on what must be presumed, at that point, to be an inanimate object. The only characters in the book who understand, and to whom the public in the courtroom—and the critics—pay no attention, are Céleste and Salamano. “‘For me, it’s a misfortune,’ said Céleste. ‘Everybody knows what a misfortune is. It leaves you defenseless. Well! for me it’s a misfortune.’ ” “ ‘You’ve got to understand,’ Salamano was saying, ‘you’ve got to understand.’ But no one seemed to understand.” Not only must we understand, but we must accept the book as it is written, without cheating.

One of the most charitable expressions used to describe the liaison with Marie is “naive indecency.” Most writers on *L’Etranger*, without

going so far as “the most shameful debauchery,” speak of “base instincts,” indifference, or the total lack of what we call “love.” Anyone willing, even for a moment, to question the red-red-rose conception of the relationship between men and women will readily admit that such a point of view is absurd. If Meursault is not particularly anxious to get married, it is because, as he says, marriage is not important. When he refuses to say that he “loves” Marie, it is because, as he says again, “that [i.e., the consecrated formula “I love you”] meant nothing.” But he also tells us that “Marie was looking at me, her eyes shining. I kissed her.” “That seemed to make her sad. [The only translation which fully renders the meaning of “elle a eu l’air triste.”] But while preparing lunch, and about nothing, she laughed again in such a way that I kissed her.” This is love, but love reduced to its essence in all the splendid poverty of the body.

The question has often been asked, “How can an ethics be constructed on a basis so fragile, so undermined by egoism and base instincts?” Sympathetic admirers of Camus assume that the title of *L’Etranger* (*The Stranger*) is never discussed because it is so clear, but this question and the following statement would seem to indicate otherwise: “. . . as the tale develops it seems clear that Meursault’s error lies precisely in his estrangement. He acts in a human situation as though human relationships, and therefore responsibilities, do not exist.” There is no “error.” Meursault knows, profoundly and instinctively, that individuals are isolated from each other by their very human condition. We are all strangers, though most people try to make believe that it is not so. It is to create the illusion that he is communicating with another human being whose presence makes him uncomfortable that the funeral director’s man feels it necessary to say “It’s hot” on the way to the village. Meursault’s natural sympathy for other isolated individuals makes him say the essential when speaking of his lawyer who does not seem to understand him: “I felt like telling him that I was like every body else, absolutely like everybody else.” The untranslatable phrase “elle a eu l’air,” referred to above, is not simply a stylistic peculiarity. It is used throughout the book whenever other people’s reactions are described to emphasize the uncertainty of the conclusions that we are wont to draw from external appearances. “You can never know.” This is why “Thou shalt not kill,” a phrase which can be said to resume the ethical message of *L’Etranger* and of all of Camus’ work. You’ve got to try to understand, say the simple. There is further a positive ethics implied. It is that feeling of honesty and of a kind of responsibility which makes Meursault save face for Raymond Sintès at the trial, even at the expense of his own life, an indefinable complex of tolerance, exigence, and mutual dependence and respect experienced by anyone who has ever indulged in team athletics. Céleste, Salamano, and Masson, all

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people who, symbolically, one must admit, do not wear neckties, know this vague but basic feeling.

Meursault, then, cannot be considered “nothing less than an intellectual,” “free from all hierarchy of values.” He is very much an intellectual, one who *has* thought (“When I had to give up my studies, etc.”). Thought does not require constant expression of complicated introspection and analysis of the processes which produced it. Meursault’s extreme lucidity is that of a man who has chosen his existence. He has judged what is normally accepted as “values,” has freed himself from all materialistic ambition, and he is free to be totally honest, to refrain from cheating, to be kind to those whom the “values” have rejected, to Raymond, Emmanuel, Salamano, who, after all, are men. He does have a past, and he speaks of it, no less often than healthy people, not so volubly as the neurotic. He has a future, and tells us at one point that, for the first time, it occurred to him that he was really going to get married. To conceive of him as being of “animal simplicity” is absurd. The statement that “I was of such a nature that my physical needs often disturbed my emotions” is explained on the following page by the phrase “just like everybody else.”

Blinded by the idea that Meursault is a “rudimentary being,” critics have paid little attention to Camus’ consummate art. To discuss it, that is, his vision of the world and of the existence of men, the title of *L’Etranger* must again be invoked. *L’Etranger* is, without Proustian interruptions, a splendid analysis, as they actually exist, of the relationships between human beings, and of the manner in which we perceive reality, or the external world. One critic has felt it: “No constructed image of the world, but an explosion of the real in incoherent psychological fragments.” The obvious key to the technique of *L’Etranger* is that the author does not try to render the entire consciousness of his character, but only those perceptions which, at various moments of life, penetrate and rise to the surface of consciousness, in the case of Meursault, a perspicacious and analytical consciousness. Outstanding examples illustrating this point are the few lines describing the nurse’s bandaged nose at the home for the aged during the wake, Sunday afternoon on the balcony, or the following still-life reflection of a fragment of reality, almost impossible to render in English: “I closed my windows and coming back I saw in the mirror a bit of table on which my alcohol lamp stood next to some pieces of bread.” These are perceptions which reveal a consciousness alerted to the pitfalls of illusion and intensely attached to the little that is left if we are to be totally honest. In the second half of the book, after the death of the Arab, the point of view, to use the expression in its real sense, changes and becomes, in a way, Proustian, that is, unhealthy, since the narrative is now that of a sick

man, one who has been torn from a healthy and active existence. Bored, he learns to remember, since he has no choice, and he succeeds, he tells us, in remembering the minutest details of his past life. Where before we were given only meaningful fragments, now we are given the impression of totality, but without being subjected to the lengthy tediousness of total recall. Proustian diarrhetic and Joycean confusion have not abolished the novel. Camus had but to say "no" and to start again from the basic essentials which had been lost since Mme de Lafayette and Laclos.